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THE BATTLE OF QUEMOY

The Amphibious Assault That Held the Postwar Military Balance in the Taiwan Strait

Maochun Miles Yu

In the annals of the communist world, the month of October enjoys supreme sanctity. The Red October of 1917 ushered in the first socialist government, which would eventually become the Soviet Union. In the People's Republic of China (PRC), October is indelibly enshrined as the anniversary month of the founding of the communist state, observed with a multiday national celebration.

But each year, amid glorious celebratory glow marking the inauguration of the PRC, the memory of a forbidden and inglorious episode surfaces—inevitably, albeit surreptitiously and furtively—within China's educated and political elite. The event took place a little over three weeks after Mao Zedong triumphantly announced at Tiananmen Square, on 1 October 1949, the establishment of the People's Republic. It is the subject of a substantial and nagging controversy that is antithetical to the overall academic and political discouragement of real historical debate, especially concerning any stain on the exalted victories of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). To most inside China who know and care about the

episode, it was an ignominious defeat that undercuts the familiar and mandatory political culture of triumph and glory.

The episode was the battle of Quemoy, known in Taiwan as the battle of Guningtou Beach, which raged for three days, 25 to 27 October 1949. The outcome was the total annihilation of three PLA regiments, totaling over nine thousand soldiers, at the hands of a beat-up and retreating Nationalist contingent. But what has made the battle of

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Quemoy so significant in the military history of the PRC, what has shaped its enduring legacy and impact, is not just the lopsided defeat of the PLA troops but how it was fought, its inauspicious timing, and the exposure of the PLA's inability to conduct naval and amphibious warfare.

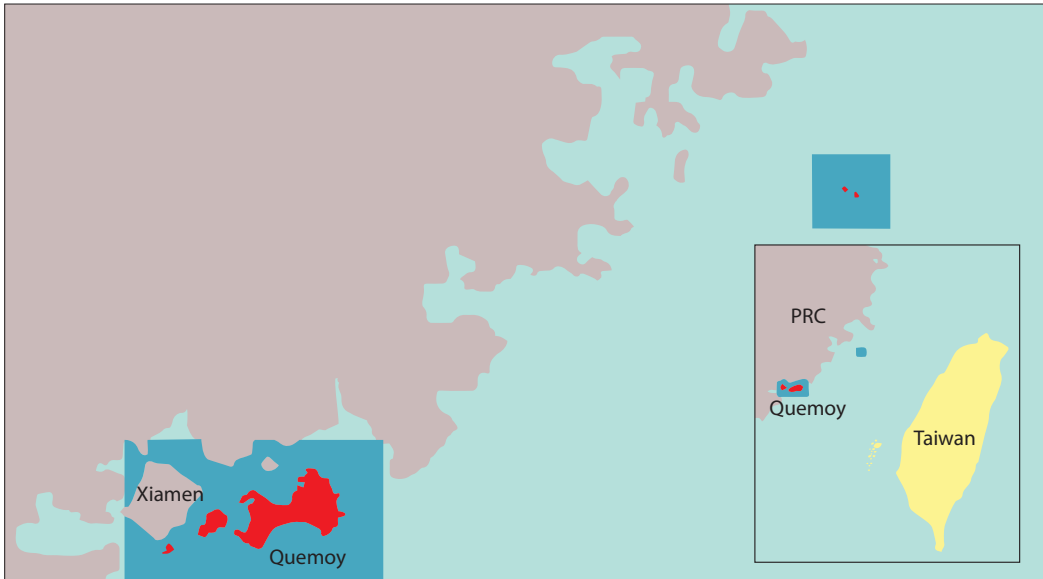
This paper seeks to analyze the key contentious issues related to the PLA's Quemoy fiasco, mainly from documents and sources published in mainland China and recently made available to the public. Though not grand or ambitious in scope, the paper endeavors to look at how and why the battle of Quemoy was fought and to dispel a few prevailing but mistaken notions based on faulty logic and the changing historical narratives emerging from China's highly mutable political climate. Finally, it addresses, first, the pivotal role the battle played in setting the pattern of confrontation that has produced a six-decade political and military separation between Nationalist Taiwan and Communist China and, second, how the battle affected the United States in its Cold War strategy.

THE BATTLE

Quemoy, variously also called Jinmen, Chin-men, or Kinmen, is a tiny, barren archipelago consisting mainly of Greater Quemoy and Lesser Quemoy, totaling a mere fifty-nine square miles. In October 1949 there were only about forty thousand residents on the islands.¹ The most striking feature of Quemoy lies not in its size but in its extreme geographical proximity to the PRC mainland—only six miles away from the metropolis of Xiamen (Amoy), which was in 1949 the second-largest city in Fujian Province and had a population of over two hundred thousand. It is important to point out that Xiamen Island (now connected to the mainland, on which part of the city stands) is merely one mile from the Chinese mainland and would be the primary spot to assemble troops and amphibious vessels for any attempt to invade Taiwan.

But Quemoy controls the sea access in and out of Xiamen and the adjacent coastal areas (see the map). For the Nationalist (Kuomintang, or KMT) government, which was in rapid strategic retreat to Taiwan, Quemoy assumed supreme strategic importance to its own survival, because it could effectively frustrate the PLA's vowed intention to invade and take Taiwan.²

By the summer of 1949, the Chinese Civil War between the Nationalists and the Communists had been raging for over three years and the Nationalists were near total defeat all across China. By late July it was beyond any doubt that the escape destination for the Nationalist government would be Taiwan. As a result, massive transportation of assets and government functions from the mainland to Taiwan began in full. Also that month the KMT's leader, Chiang Kai-shek, started to prepare for a pivotal battle to hold Quemoy, which was not even fortified at the time. Although nearby Xiamen Island was much more important in



a political and psychological sense, Quemoy would be more crucial militarily, because it could control all maritime assets in and access to the area, including Xiamen. So from the beginning Chiang Kai-shek was prepared to lose Xiamen but determined to keep Quemoy at any cost. He deployed the KMT's 22nd Army to garrison Quemoy, with about twenty thousand troops, in addition to a tank battalion with twenty-one American-made M5A1 Stuart tanks, each of which had a rapid-fire 47 mm gun. The Stuart tanks would play a pivotal role.

For three days, between 25 and 27 October, a battle for Quemoy raged. Invading PLA troops were greatly outnumbered, and the fighting was desperate on both sides. In the end, however, the PLA suffered a devastating defeat, one that shocked its high command. The entire three PLA regiments committed—9,086 men in all, including 350 local fishermen conscripted as captains of transport craft—were annihilated. About five thousand were killed, and the rest were captured as prisoners of war.³

WAS THE SHORTAGE OF TRANSPORT SHIPS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FIASCO?

There is no doubt that a severe shortage of troop transports was a key factor in deciding the outcome of the battle of Quemoy. But the problem was not just a lack of vessels but poor planning and hostility from local residents.

The transport shortage had much to do with faulty planning by the PLA commanders. From the beginning, an attack on Xiamen had outweighed all other offensives along the Fujian coast, greatly diminishing any meaningful preparation for the planned assault on Quemoy. The mission of taking Xiamen and Quemoy

was handed to the PLA 3rd Field Army's 10th Army, under the command of a battle-hardened general, Ye Fei. He divided his three corps into two task forces. The 29th and 31st Corps would take on Xiamen. These corps were more offensively oriented and much better equipped than the smaller and weaker 28th Corps, which would take on Quemoy, then considered less important than Xiamen. The original plan was that the two task forces would launch simultaneous assaults on the KMT defenders of both Xiamen and Quemoy.

But doing so would require the two task forces to commandeer a large number of fishing vessels from local villages as troop transports. The commanding general of the 10th Army, General Ye, believed that many fishing vessels in the region were being systematically destroyed by KMT planes to avoid their being used by the advancing Communist troops.⁴ But Ye's memoir does not provide any evidence of such bombing or instances when it occurred. On the contrary, most damage to and losses of commandeered fishing vessels were caused by storms during a minor island offensive prior to the attacks on Xiamen and Quemoy.⁵ In his memoir Ye Fei contradicts himself, stating that in the island battles immediately prior to the battle of Quemoy not a single transport ship was lost to enemy planes and that this was taken as a welcome sign that the KMT might not use planes at Quemoy either.⁶

The primary reason for the lack of fishing vessels was that local fishermen were generally hostile to the Communist troops in the area. The biggest sector of the economy in the region was fishing, and the most important asset for a fisherman was his boat. Most fishermen resisted the PLA demand to surrender their vessels as troop transports. They hid their vessels or scuttled them to avoid their being taken over by the PLA troops.⁷ General Xiao Feng, the on-scene, operational commander in the Quemoy battle, would recall in his own memoir that "fishermen in this coastal area either abandoned their fishing vessels and fled from us, or took their vessels with them and hid them; others even deliberately destroyed their fishing vessels to avoid being commandeered by us. We could not find the vessels when we found the fishermen; or we could not find the fishermen to operate these vessels when we found the vessels."⁸

Because of the shortage of transport ships, the original plan to attack Xiamen and Quemoy simultaneously was abandoned. The new plan was to attack Xiamen first, concentrating all the ships and boats already commandeered by the 10th Army, and to postpone the campaign against Quemoy until the Xiamen campaign was over and the ships and boats used in it could be released.

The battle for Xiamen started on 15 October and lasted two full days. The battle had something expected and something unexpected. The "expected" was the outcome, a smashing victory over demoralized defenders, who did not put up a real fight. Some twenty-seven thousand KMT soldiers were either killed

or captured, the majority of the originally stationed defenders having fled on ships to either Taiwan or other outlying islands still under KMT control. The unexpected result of the Xiamen campaign was devastating losses of transport vessels. After the Xiamen campaign, what remained for the 28th Corps to use in its upcoming Quemoy assault was fewer than three hundred small fishing boats, none motorized.

The battle plan for Quemoy was to land twenty thousand PLA troops on the island's beaches. But with fewer than three hundred small boats available, the task force would have to be transported in two groups. The first would be three PLA regiments, or about 8,700 troops, in addition to the 350 fishermen, most of them unwilling to serve the PLA but having no choice. The plan contemplated that once the first landing group reached the beachhead, the vessels would return to the PLA positions to take the second landing group, which would consist of four regiments, another eleven thousand troops. PLA intelligence estimated that there were about twenty thousand KMT defenders on Quemoy at the time and that the combined invasion force, twenty thousand PLA soldiers, would reach parity in strength, one to one. Given the PLA's superior morale and fighting spirit, victory over the defeatist and demoralized KMT defenders on Quemoy would be inevitable.⁹

But the plan went badly. After the first three regiments were delivered to the beachhead—in the middle of the night, apparently undetected by the defenders—the tide went out, and all the ships grounded in the shoals, where they were mercilessly destroyed by the KMT defenders by shore, sea, and air. Not a single ship or boat was able to return to pick up the reinforcing second landing group. Although grave miscalculation of ocean tides was later blamed by most participants and PRC historians as the chief culprit for the transport debacle, it was not the most decisive factor in the failure of the transport vessels to return for the second group.

Ignoring advice from local fishermen, the PLA commanders on board the vessels had ordered the vessels to approach the shore as closely as possible so that the invasion troops would have an easier walk to the beach. The vessels arrived at high tide, between 0130 and 0200 (1:30 and 2:00 AM), passing over underwater antiship obstacles and ship-snatching barbed wire. When the tide began to recede, some vessels became entangled with the newly exposed obstacles. PLA commanders realized the danger and ordered the swift return of the vessels to deeper water before the tide got too low. But it was too late; all of them became stuck on a long stretch of beach in a scene of total chaos.¹⁰ When a land mine near the landing beach was accidentally ignited by a KMT patrol, the explosion triggered feverish searchlight sweeps by the coastal defenses, which discovered the shambles of landing vessels stuck on and near the beach.¹¹ Gunfire and bombing

erupted and lasted for more than two hours. Dawn, when it arrived, allowed KMT B-25 bombers and warships to shell the hapless landing forces, destroying all of them. Not a single vessel escaped.¹² The entire Quemoy battle plan, which hinged critically on the ability of the transport vessels to return to pick up eleven thousand more PLA troops, had turned into a complete fiasco.

WAS THE PLA'S LACK OF NAVAL POWER AND AIRPOWER RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FIASCO?

In his memoir, Ye Fei, the officer in overall charge of the battle of Quemoy, blames the PLA's lack of naval power and airpower during the battle for the defeat. "The most important and most salient lesson [for the defeat at Quemoy] was that at the time, the Chiang Kai-shek army had a navy and an air force, which remained basically intact during the War of National Liberation [the Civil War, 1946–49]; while our army did not have a navy and an air force, which forced us to cross the sea to fight by way of sailboats, without air cover, without naval support from the sea."¹³ So states Ye Fei, and his argument seems reasonable on the surface. However, a careful scrutiny will reveal that his summary of the reasons for the defeat is without merit.

During the battle of Quemoy, the KMT had at its disposal twenty-five B-25 light bombers and about fifty FB-26 fighter-bombers.¹⁴ The PLA had a squadron of P-51 Mustangs, captured from the KMT, but these pursuit planes had been used in the ceremonial extravaganza in Beijing marking the founding of the People's Republic of China in early October. They were still in North China.¹⁵ On the naval side, the KMT had a total of nine ships, mostly small patrol vessels and light frigates.

During the battle, the PLA command was fully aware of these KMT naval and air assets and took measures to deny their usefulness. The most important decision made by Ye Fei, in this connection, and his subordinate Xiao Feng—and it was a correct one—was to conduct the amphibious assault at night, because the KMT air force did not have a nighttime capability. Also, with the cover of night the PLA troops could avoid being detected by the KMT warships and so launch a surprise attack. On both accounts the PLA command was right, and the invasion troops did successfully avoid attack by KMT air or naval assets during the entire trip to the beaches on the first night of the battle. In addition, the PLA mounted a battery of eighty pieces of artillery on nearby Dadeng Island.¹⁶ Though not overwhelming, these guns could silence the KMT's small patrol boats during the landing phase.

Ye Fei's argument is even less plausible if one considers the many amphibious battles the PLA launched against even more dominant KMT sea and air superiority, notably at Hainan Island some six months later. In virtually all these other

instances, despite overwhelming KMT naval and air superiority, the PLA island assaults prevailed.

What General Ye neglected to point out in his memoir is another key reason for the Quemoy defeat—the fatefully delayed departure of the invasion forces. It was less than six miles from the PLA embarkation points to the Quemoy beaches. Under the weather conditions at the time, a favorably robust northeast breeze, it would take less than one hour to reach the destination. The invasion forces were accordingly ordered to board the vessels around 1900 (seven o'clock) on the evening of 24 October. But indecision on the part of Ye Fei and Xiao Feng and command ambiguity between them, in addition to utterly chaotic boarding and loading procedures, delayed the departure by several hours, greatly shortening the period of darkness, the window during which the KMT air and sea forces could not attack. Most of the vessels did not sail until after midnight.¹⁷

The armada itself was also disorganized. The three regiments set sail from three different spots. Once entering open water, their vessels were to rendezvous at a designated area and then proceed together. This order wasted about an hour. Worse, because of radio silence to avoid enemy detection, the vessels had no communications with each other. As a result, the rendezvous was never really completed; the vessels swarmed to Quemoy without any coordination or unified command, arriving intermittently between 0130 and 0200, far later than originally planned, with only three or four hours left within which to land their troops.

Given that delay, even if all three hundred transport vessels had returned to the rear echelon and picked up the eleven thousand men of the second group, they would most likely have been annihilated. The most important element of a victory—that is, inability of the KMT forces to attack by air or sea—would have been lost with the advent of daylight on 25 October.

We can then safely conclude that Ye Fei's theory about the primary reason for the Quemoy fiasco is incorrect.

WAS INTELLIGENCE FAILURE CRUCIAL FOR THE FIASCO?

Before the assault was launched on 24 October, the PLA commanders gathered a substantial amount of intelligence on the enemy and the target area. Reports poured into the command headquarters of General Ye, the overall commander, and of Xiao Feng, the operational commander. These reports were generally classified as either political or operational intelligence. In both categories the PLA commanders fundamentally misjudged the intelligence in front of them and made seriously flawed decisions that doomed the entire invasion.

Political intelligence had been the PLA's forte, as it dealt with timely and accurate assessment of the enemy's will to fight. Yet both commanders erred gravely in the Quemoy assault. Their overall assessments of the Quemoy defenders were

more romantic than professional. They believed deeply that the KMT's 22nd Army on Quemoy was morbidly defeatist and incompetent, ready to flee at the sight of the PLA invaders. "Landing on the beach of Quemoy is victory itself" was the watchword given to many PLA units in the operation.¹⁸ So pervasive was the assumption of the enemy's lack of will to fight that the transports carrying the primary assault regiment contained large amounts of cash in several heavy chests for the use of celebrating the "liberation of Quemoy" in an extravaganza planned for the next day. Several other larger ships were loaded with live pigs and with office furniture to be used by the new local government to be run by communist cadres.¹⁹

To be fair, this was not the problem of only PLA commanders in Fujian Province at the time. Rao Shushi, the political commissar of the PLA's 3rd Field Army, which was in charge of the entire East China region, was hopelessly contemptuous, on the eve of the battle, of the KMT troops' will to fight. "Rao Shushi developed a 'mentality of underestimating the enemy,'" later recalled Marshal Chen Yi, who commanded the 3rd Field Army. "He believed that once our troops landed on the beach, enemies on Quemoy would surrender without fighting. All we needed was to send in one or two divisions to attack, the Quemoy problem would be solved."²⁰

But the PLA commanders' estimate of the enemy's will to fight was wrong. Admittedly, the KMT troops were indeed a ragtag bunch. The 22nd Army, then stationed at Quemoy, was under the command of a general named Li Liangrong. Li and his troops were not Chiang Kai-shek's favorites, and they were generally underequipped and undertrained. But General Li made these troops into a formidable fighting force that displayed tenacity and ruthlessness in the three-day battle.

First of all, Li was given substantial reinforcement at the crucial time. Chiang Kai-shek realized Li's inadequacy in troop strength and redeployed, swiftly and sub rosa, one of his best units, the 18th Army, totaling twenty thousand troops, to Quemoy. Arriving before and during the battle, these troops greatly boosted the morale of General Li's men. The determination of this ragtag but spirited army, however, was already extraordinarily high, in part because of an utter hatred of the communists.

A recent popular writing in mainland China by a high-level PLA general tells a revealing story, one that explains the abject hatred of General Li's men for PLA soldiers and the ruthlessness of Quemoy's defenders. It relates to the battle of Xiamen, fought several miles away immediately prior to the battle for Quemoy. The PLA won that battle, during which many KMT soldiers took off their uniforms and hid as civilians in residential neighborhoods. The PLA commander in Xiamen ordered cars to broadcast via loudspeakers promises of leniency and safe

repatriation to Taiwan if they came out and surrendered. Within hours, hundreds of KMT officers and soldiers answered the propaganda and emerged from hiding. They were rounded up by PLA troops at the harbor. After dusk, they were machine-gunned, execution-style.²¹ Fear and outrage generated by incidents like this permeated the 22nd Army on Quemoy, and General Li adroitly used such psychology to instill in his troops despair and ruthlessness—the very essence of a formidable enemy.²²

If PLA political intelligence was inaccurate, tactical and operational intelligence was not much better. General Ye Fei was never clear about exactly how many defenders there were on Quemoy. He believed there were no more than twenty thousand; further, he estimated at the time, “Li Liangrong’s 22nd Army was nothing but maimed soldiers and defeated generals [残兵败将].” He was completely fooled by a KMT deception plan. Chiang meant to hold on to Quemoy at any cost, and as noted, he had reinforced it with his crack force, the 18th Army, under the able Hu Lian. But even more important, Chiang ordered the armada carrying General Hu’s troops to land secretly on the rocky south side of Quemoy Island, opposite the anticipated PLA landing strips on the north and northwest sides. Unbeknownst to Ye Fei, by 24 October, when the PLA launched the assault, half of Hu’s twenty thousand troops were already on the island. The other half was struggling to land safely through heavy waves; they succeeded after the battle started.

This intelligence would have been crucial. Had General Ye known of it, he would never have ordered the attack. The PLA force would have been greatly outnumbered, in a ratio of less than one to two, even if all his planned troops had been able to land at once, which would not be the case. In the end, the actual PLA/KMT troop ratio during the battle was one to five.²³ Faulty intelligence led General Ye to believe that he could reach troop parity on Quemoy if he could land close to twenty thousand soldiers. Ye’s landing plan was to be utterly invalidated and disastrous, but in the meantime he was so confident in this parity that he refused to consider any alternatives even when newly acquired evidence pointed to the strong possibility that the enemy had already been reinforced by the entire twenty-thousand-man 18th Army.

On 14 October, ten days before the order was given to invade Quemoy, General Xiao, the PLA operational commander of the battle of Quemoy, received a shocking piece of intelligence. Two KMT officers belonging to Hu Lian’s 18th Army, captured in an unrelated skirmish, had revealed that the whole 11th Division of that army had landed on Quemoy five days earlier.²⁴ General Xiao immediately reported this crucial piece of intelligence to his superior, General Ye, who dismissed it as bunk.²⁵ Frustrated by Ye’s intransigence, Xiao did something daring—he managed to report his concern to Ye’s superior, General Su Yu, the

deputy commander for operations for the 3rd Field Army. General Su had been designated by Mao Zedong as the overall planner for a quick invasion of Taiwan, fulfilling Mao's vow "to carry the Revolution to the ultimate end."

Alarmed by the Quemoy situation, Su issued an instruction, now famous in the Chinese military, known as the "three conditions for calling off the Quemoy campaign." That is, the attack on Quemoy should be called off if one of the following three conditions existed: first, if the enemy augmented the island defending force by more than one regiment; second, if there were not enough transports to carry six regiments at one time; or third, if there were not at least six thousand pro-Communist, politically reliable boat handlers available from the old "Liberated Area" of northern Jiangsu and Shandong, nearly a thousand miles north of Fujian.²⁶

But General Ye did not heed Su's instructions and bullheadedly went on with his attack plan. Nevertheless, Ye sensed General Xiao's lack of enthusiasm in light of the mounting difficulties of attacking Quemoy. On 18 October, six days before the battle began, he spent nearly three hours with General Xiao and Xiao's commissar, General Li Mancun, trying to dispel their doubts and eventually ordering them to launch the earliest possible attack.²⁷

But Xiao and Li Mancun were still not persuaded. "I raised the issue to my superior of the 10th Army," Xiao recounted in his memoir, "that . . . we did not know how many enemy reinforcements had arrived at Quemoy, which made the preparation for the invasion of Quemoy inadequate and it would be difficult to launch an early assault on Quemoy."²⁸ But General Ye and his headquarters staff would have none of this. "My superiors at the 10th Army all replied to me by saying that the 28th Corps should resolutely implement the 10th Army headquarters' order to seize the battlefield advantage to launch an earliest possible invasion to liberate Quemoy," Xiao Feng would bitterly recall.²⁹ As to what exactly the "battlefield advantage" was, General Ye declared with relish, "The enemies defending Quemoy have already become frightened by us, like birds scared by the mere twang of a bowstring [惊弓之鸟]."

On 20 October, four days before the battle began, General Xiao, still spooked by uncertainty about enemy troop strength on Quemoy, again requested General Ye to postpone the operation.³⁰ Ye was not amused by the new request and denied it with alacrity. However, two days later, on 22 October, new intelligence reports came to General Xiao that another division of Hu Lian's 18th Army had just appeared in waters off Quemoy. General Xiao immediately reported to Ye, hoping that a delay of action would be approved.³¹

Incredibly, General Ye interpreted the intelligence the wrong way. He picked up the phone and personally told Xiao that the intention of the KMT force near Quemoy was not clear and that the PLA attack should be hurried, before General

Hu's troops could land.³² We now know that General Ye was completely out of the picture with regard to Hu's reinforcements. Not only had one of Hu's divisions landed on Quemoy days earlier, but the division reported to be on the sea was just waiting for the choppy seas to calm in order to land, which happened within hours.

General Xiao, still unwilling to take the risk of attacking, stated that he could not possibly proceed with the operation the next day as ordered and requested a one-day delay, until 24 October. Ye Fei finally agreed, and the operation was thus set for the 24th. Incredibly, though, in granting the delay, Ye told Xiao that "according to various intelligence reports, there had been no reinforcement of enemy's troops in Quemoy, which was only at 12,000 troops strong."³³ In fact, at the time, there were more than thirty thousand KMT troops on Quemoy.

The departure for the invasion was set at night, to avoid naval and air raids. Three regiments from General Xiao's 28th Corps boarded the nearly three hundred small fishing boats being used as transports between 6 and 7 PM, ready to set sail to attack Quemoy. Around 8 PM, however, Xiao received a revised intelligence report from 10th Army headquarters in Xiamen that the KMT 18th Army had just landed a regiment on the south side of Quemoy. However, 10th Army directed that General Ye's order to attack Quemoy that evening was not to be changed—instead, Xiao's troops were to race to reach Quemoy ahead of the rest of Hu Lian's force.

But General Xiao, shocked by the new report, immediately ordered all three of his regiments, on board and ready to set sail, to stand fast. He placed an urgent call to the 10th Army headquarters in Xiamen and requested that the entire attack plan be called off until more intelligence on enemy's troop strength could be ascertained and more transports could be commandeered. But General Ye was nowhere to be found. Answering General Xiao's urgent call was Liu Peishan, Ye's deputy commissar and political director, who rejected Xiao's request. General Xiao later recalled, "I clearly stated to Liu on the phone that we [should] halt the attack plan, wait for clarification on the true situations of the enemy, obtain more transport ships before we take action. Hearing that, Director Liu only said, 'Proceed according to the original plan, the decision shall not be changed.' Then he hung up the phone."³⁴

Around midnight, the invading armada set sail for Quemoy. It arrived an hour and a half later, and the epic battle began.

WAS COMMAND CHAOS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FIASCO?

In the aftermath of the disastrous defeat, Xiao Feng went to his superior, Ye Fei, and asked to be punished for the defeat. Ye replied that it was he himself who should be punished for the infamy at Quemoy. General Ye promptly drafted a

lengthy cable to his superior, General Su Yu at the 3rd Field Army, asking for punishment. Su, however, rejected Ye's request and instead cabled Mao Zedong directly asking that he, Su, be punished, for his failure to ensure victory. Mao, the supreme leader of the Communist forces in China, rejected General Su's request, saying essentially that nobody should be punished. "The loss at Quemoy is not a matter of punishment," Mao declared. "Instead, it's a matter of learning a lesson from it."³⁵

All this is telling, because it reflects the kind of command chaos that existed before and during the battle of Quemoy. No one was responsible for command integrity or organizational coordination.

The 10th Army commander, General Ye Fei, had been born in the Philippines of Chinese parents from the Fujian area. Ye, who had joined the communists seventeen years earlier as a young man of no social or political distinction, had returned to his hometown as a glorious conqueror and wartime leader of over 120,000 troops.³⁶ When Ye captured the picturesque metropolis of Xiamen, he promptly moved his headquarters to the city, immersing himself in urban life and acting more like a mayor than a military commander with battles still raging in his area.³⁷ In fact, the moment Ye moved into Xiamen he sent for his mother, who had been living in rural Fujian, moving her into his headquarters to share the euphoria and glory.³⁸

For the remaining, and militarily more daunting, task of taking Quemoy, General Ye designated the weakest of his three corps, the 28th Corps. However, in late August 1949 the 28th Corps's longtime commander, General Zhu Shaoqing, had suffered a stomach illness and was now in Shanghai, newly captured from the KMT, for medical treatment. The political commissar of the 28th Corps, General Chen Meizao, was in a hospital in Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian Province, enjoying the ease of urban life. In addition, the 28th Corps's longtime chief of staff, Wu Shu, had been reassigned without replacement. General Ye then appointed Zhu Shaoqing's deputy commander, a staff general named Xiao Feng, to command the 28th Corps, without a deputy commander or a chief of staff.³⁹

The first invasion group was to consist of three regiments. However, as General Ye ordered, only two would come from the 28th Corps; the third would come from another corps, the 29th, also under Ye's command. This was done mainly so that the 29th Corps could share the anticipated glory of victory at Quemoy. But mixing troops from competing units confused the organic command structure of the 28th Corps.⁴⁰ Also, there was some rivalry between the 28th Corps and 29th Corps, and there had been ill feeling in the competition to commandeer local fishing vessels.⁴¹

General Ye realized the potential for rivalry among the three hurriedly mixed regiments, but his response, rather inexplicably, was that there should be no

overall commander for the entire invasion force. The three regimental commanders were to act with equal command authority, with individual battle plans; Xiao Feng was to stay in the rear echelon listening to their radio reports once the battle started.⁴² To achieve the element of surprise, however, as we have seen, radio silence was ordered while the armada of wooden sailing vessels was on its way. So there was absolutely no communication among vessels during the entire landing process, which further aggravated the command problem.

In the event, the most deadly weapons used by the KMT defenders against the invading PLA troops and vessels were the twenty-one M5A1 Stuart tanks. The PLA command had known about the tanks beforehand and had prepared antitank rockets to deal with them. But the antitank rockets came in three parts, which needed to be assembled before launch. General Xiao ordered the parts carried by separate ships. When the force attempted to land and came under fierce and devastating tank fire, none of the antitank rockets could be assembled.⁴³

WAS THE BATTLE OF QUEMOY A “TURNING POINT” IN HISTORY?

Mao Zedong admitted that the battle of Quemoy was the biggest loss to the PLA during the Chinese Civil War.⁴⁴ Three regiments of PLA troops were completely wiped out by the KMT, in utter contrast to the military zeitgeist of the time, when the Nationalist army as a whole was in an avalanche of retreat and defeat. In the annals of the Nationalists' military history, the triumph at Quemoy, known in Taiwan as the battle of Guningtou Beach, marked a turning point, the final halting of the momentum of the PLA assault against Taiwan. It was the battle that saved the Republic of China; it was Chiang Kai-shek's battle of Midway, turning the tide of history and sealing for the future the general pattern of the Cold War confrontation in Asia.

The KMT claim is not entirely without merit. The battle of Quemoy did indeed end the PLA's amphibious attempts to capture the offshore islands. But far more importantly, Quemoy has since become a focal point and symbol of the epic struggle between communist and noncommunist forces in Asia. Metaphorically and realistically, the battle made the tiny island of Quemoy, just a few miles from Communist China, Asia's West Berlin, triggering decades of military confrontations in and around it. In 1954 and 1958 the PLA launched major artillery bombardments almost bringing on a nuclear Armageddon by involving the United States and possibly the Soviet Union. Intermittent artillery bombardment on Quemoy, with real shells or pamphlets, would last for many years. They would not stop until 1 January 1979, when the United States abandoned its diplomatic recognition of Taipei and switched to Beijing as the legitimate government of “China.”

However, the PLA historian Xu Yan disputes the idea that the battle of Quemoy was really a turning point of anything:⁴⁵ “The defeat at Quemoy at the hands

of the KMT forces was only a small episode at the last stage of the PLA's strategic pursuit against the collapsing KMT regime[;] . . . it did not affect the strategic outcome of the war a bit" (p. 93). It is hard to disagree with Mr. Xu Yan. However, it should also be noted that the battle of Quemoy had an unintended strategic consequence that few could have realized at the time. That is, the utter shambles at Quemoy may have saved the PLA from an even bigger catastrophe known as the battle of Taiwan, which had been actively contemplated by the PLA high command, from Mao Zedong on down.

After the fiasco, Mao ordered the 3rd Field Army to prepare for an even larger invasion of Taiwan. The task fell on the shoulders of General Su Yu, the deputy commander for operations of the 3rd Field Army and the realist who had cautioned about the three conditions that should have invalidated any attack on Quemoy. Three weeks later, General Su, now the chairman of the Liberating Taiwan Working Committee, proceeded with specific planning for an invasion of Taiwan. On 20 November 1949 he laid out his plan to senior PLA commanders.⁴⁶

The Quemoy lessons loomed large in Su Yu's plan. By mid-December he had become the leading voice of reason and calm, realistically assessing the difficulties of an amphibious invasion of Taiwan. He reported to Mao Zedong several times his concerns and cautions. That might not have gained him favor from the triumphalist chairman, then getting ready to travel to Moscow to meet Joseph Stalin and take charge of "making revolutions" in Asia while the Soviet Union occupied itself with Western and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, on 17 December Su Yu officially postponed the date for invading Taiwan.⁴⁷

General Ye Fei may have left the best summary of this point. "In the early 1950s, when our navy and air force were still inferior to the enemy, if we proceeded with wooden sailboats to liberate Taiwan by crossing the Taiwan Strait, we would have had an even bigger fiasco than the battle of Quemoy. After the defeat at Quemoy, we learned our lesson; our head became more clear and lucid. Perhaps the real significance of learning from the lessons and experience of our Quemoy operation lies exactly here."⁴⁸

Yet the real significance of the battle of Quemoy goes beyond even this. The battle may be most important not in itself but in spite of itself. Its importance has something to do with what else was going on in the much larger international arena.

At the time, the Harry Truman administration in the United States had all but given up supporting the Chiang Kai-shek government. Two months before the battle of Quemoy, the White House approved a China white paper that largely blamed Chiang Kai-shek and his government for the loss of China to the Communists. Washington expected the defeat of the KMT army to be thorough and inevitable, including the loss of the island of Taiwan, although it had been heavily

built up by Chiang for the impending transfer of his government. The Nationalist general Sun Liren, the garrison commander of Taiwan and a favorite of the U.S. administration, reported to Washington by a separate channel in September 1949, a few weeks before Quemoy, that the PLA was capable of assembling an invading armada of a thousand vessels carrying two hundred thousand troops who would take over Taiwan within twenty-four hours.⁴⁹ The newly established Central Intelligence Agency too was thoroughly convinced that the PLA would take over Taiwan militarily by the end of 1950.⁵⁰

But the battle of Quemoy changed all that. One week after the Nationalist victory at Quemoy and most likely in response to it, the Truman administration initiated contact with Chiang for the first time since 1948. The American consul general in Taipei officially informed Chiang on 3 November that the U.S. government would support his efforts toward reform and democracy in Taiwan.⁵¹ This was an enormous morale boost for Chiang and his defeated government. He now for the first time had Washington's support for using Taiwan as a base from which he might stage a comeback to the mainland. It also marked the beginning of official American recognition of the Republic of China in Taiwan, which lasted until the 1970s.

Further, after the battle of Quemoy the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff adjusted, albeit with a certain subtlety, its military posture toward Chiang in Taiwan. The Joint Chiefs now suggested to the White House that limited military assistance be provided to the KMT troops in Taiwan, though it ruled out direct military involvement in Taiwan.⁵² The momentum of readjustment by the United States in favor of the KMT government in Taiwan created by the battle of Quemoy, however nuanced and limited, would be given robust boosts by two other major international events: the outbreak of the Korean War less than eight months later and the loss of the U.S. monopoly on atomic bombs at the same time.

In this sense, the battle of Quemoy was not only a turning point for the Civil War that still remains unresolved across the Taiwan Strait but also the beginning of a chain of events that shaped the Cold War throughout Asia and the Pacific region for decades to come.

NOTES

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1. Xu Yan, *The Battle of Quemoy* [徐焰, 金门之战, 中国广播电视出版社, 北京] (1992), pp. 47–48.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
3. Dangdai zhongguo de junshi gongzuo [当代中国的军事工作, 中国社会科学院出版社] (1989), p. 237; Xiao Feng, “My Recollection of the Battle of Quemoy,” in *Recollections of the Amphibious Battle of Quemoy*, ed. Xiao Feng et al. [回顾金门之战, 载于萧锋, 李曼村等, 回顾金门登陆战, 人民出版社] (1994), p. 40; Xu, *Battle of Quemoy*, p. 82; Liu Yazhou, *Examination of the Campaign of Quemoy* [金门战役检讨, 载于中国报道周刊] (20 April 2004), p. 12. There is little disagreement among mainland historians on the numbers of PLA soldiers who were killed. On the prisoner-of-war (POW) number, Xu Yan believes it should be around three thousand, while Liu Yazhou’s number is four thousand. It is likely that Xu confuses the actual number, which should be around four thousand, with the number of PLA POWs returned to mainland China between 1950 and 1956, which was around three thousand; see Liu, *Examination of the Campaign of Quemoy*, p. 12. The returned PLA POWs all became “nonpersons” in China and would suffer harsh treatments ranging from dishonorable discharge to prison terms—even outright execution—for being “traitors.” See Liu, *Examination of the Campaign of Quemoy*, p. 12, and Feizi Longxiang, “The Fate of Returned POWs Captured from the Battle of Quemoy” [飞子龙翔: 金门之战回归战俘的命运], *Feizi Longxiang’s Blog*, zxy0808.bokee.com/.
4. Ye Fei, *Ye Fei Memoir* [叶飞回忆录, 解放军出版社] (1988), p. 601.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 598–601.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 599.
7. Xiao, “My Recollection of the Battle of Quemoy,” p. 23.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Xu, *Battle of Quemoy*, pp. 44–47.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
12. Ye, *Ye Fei Memoir*, p. 604; Xiao, “My Recollection of the Battle of Quemoy,” p. 33; Xu, *Battle of Quemoy*, p. 66.
13. Ye, *Ye Fei Memoir*, p. 606.
14. Xu, *Battle of Quemoy*, p. 61.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
18. Liu, *Examination of the Campaign of Quemoy*, p. 3.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Xu, *Battle of Quemoy*, pp. 61–62.
24. Xiao, “My Recollection of the Battle of Quemoy,” p. 23.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Su Yu was ensnared in a major political purge in 1958 and as the PLA’s Chief of Staff was a main target of a relentless “antidogmatism in military affairs” campaign engineered by his immediate superior, Marshal Peng Dehuai, Mao’s defense minister for much of the 1950s. A year later, in July 1959, Peng was purged in turn by Mao for opposing the chairman’s disastrous “Great Leap Forward” movement. In the 1980s, after Mao’s death, Peng was politically rehabilitated. But one cannot rehabilitate a victim of a rehabilitated PLA marshal; also, the chief henchman who carried out Peng’s “Struggling against Su Yu” campaign in 1958 was Deng Xiaoping, who essentially ruled China from 1978 until his death in 1997. As a result, positive spin in recent decades on Su Yu’s salient caution about the Quemoy battle, in the form of the “three conditions for calling off the Quemoy campaign,” generates intense, politically motivated internal debate among factions of the PLA. For such positive spin on Su Yu, see Xiao Feng, “Unforgettable Instructions,” in *The General of Our Generation: Remembering Comrade Su Yu* [萧锋, 难忘的教诲, 载于“一代名将: 回忆粟裕同志”, 上海人民出版社] (1986), p. 299; Xu, *Battle of Quemoy*, pp. 89–90; and Liu, *Examination of the Campaign of Quemoy*, p. 4. For a negative view see Hong Xiaoxia, “Doubting and Investigating ‘The Three Conditions for Calling off the Quemoy Campaign’—and Assessing the Value of Memoirs as Historical Evidence,” *Journal of Modern History Studies* 3 (2002) [洪小夏《金门战斗“三不打”的质疑与考证—兼论回忆录的史料价值及其考辨》],

- 《近代史研究》, 2002年第3期], and Wang Hongguang, "An Inquiry into the 'Three Conditions for Calling off the Quemoy Campaign,'" *Journal of Military History* (November 2012) [王洪光, 对金门战役“三不打”的考证 《军事历史》 2012/11].
27. Ye, *Ye Fei Memoir*, pp. 600–601; Xiao, "My Recollection of the Battle of Quemoy," p. 24.
 28. Xiao, "My Recollection of the Battle of Quemoy," p. 24.
 29. Ibid.
 30. Ibid., p. 25.
 31. Ibid.
 32. Ibid.
 33. Ibid., p. 26.
 34. Ibid., pp. 28–29.
 35. Xu, *Battle of Quemoy*, p. 91; Ye, *Ye Fei Memoir*, p. 606.
 36. Liu, *Examination of the Campaign of Quemoy*, pp. 2–3.
 37. Xu, *Battle of Quemoy*, pp. 597–98.
 38. Liu, *Examination of the Campaign of Quemoy*, pp. 2–3.
 39. Xiao, "My Recollection of the Battle of Quemoy," p. 16.
 40. Liu, *Examination of the Campaign of Quemoy*, pp. 3–4.
 41. Ye, *Ye Fei Memoir*, p. 600.
 42. Xiao Feng was originally designated the overall commander and told to accompany the invasion troops, but hours before the departure of the armada General Ye's headquarters ordered him to stay behind; Xiao, "My Recollection of the Battle of Quemoy," p. 29. Xiao also recalls in his memoir that he designated a division commander, Zhong Xianwen, to be the overall commander of the three regiments and asked him to go to Quemoy with the first invasion group. But, according to Xiao, Zhong's flagship was commandeered by one of the three regiment commanders as a troop transport (p. 33). This is quite implausible, because a regiment commander could not possibly commandeer a division commander's flagship. If this did indeed happen, it further testifies to the miserable command chaos suffered by the 28th Corps in the hands of an incompetent, understaffed, and weak corps commander.
 43. Liu, *Examination of the Campaign of Quemoy*, p. 8.
 44. Mao Zedong to key PLA field army commanders, 29 October 1949, in Xiao, "My Recollection of the Battle of Quemoy," p. 42.
 45. Xu, *Battle of Quemoy*, pp. 92–93.
 46. *The Chronicle of Su Yu's Life* [粟裕年谱] (Jiangsu Party History Work Office, Contemporary China, 2006), pp. 487–89.
 47. Ibid.
 48. Ye, *Ye Fei Memoir*, p. 608.
 49. Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo's Son: Chiang Ching-kuo and the Revolutions in China and Taiwan*, Chinese ed. (Beijing: Huawen, 2010), p. 156.
 50. Ibid., p. 160.
 51. Ibid., p. 157.
 52. Ibid., pp. 159–60.